AN EXPLORATION OF MINDFULNESS MEDITATION: BUDDHIST ROOTS AND SECULAR BRANCHES

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ABSTRACT

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Mindfulness meditation is a practice of intentional, present-centered awareness, cultivated in stillness and silence (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The practice has been known in the East for its holistic benefits for thousands of years, yet has recently gained increasing interest in the West (Fraser, 2013). It seems that people are looking for practical ways to relieve their stress and cope with the effects of the fast-paced nature of modern daily life, for which mindfulness meditation provides a pause that many of us long for.

Although meditation is often associated with relaxation, the practice comes with its challenges, for which I have found Buddhist philosophy to thoroughly elucidate (Thera, 1998). Much research demonstrates the many benefits of meditation, yet the term 'mindfulness' is somewhat ambiguous (de Vibe et al., 2012). The Satipatthāna Sutta—a Buddhist scripture known as *The Way of Mindfulness*—provides clarifying distinctions that are invaluable for our practice of mindfulness meditation, which is a form of attentional training that can affect a transformation in our awareness and perception of the world (Deatherage, 1975; Thera, 1998). This enhanced construct for mindfulness serves to enrich our adoption of a practice that can benefit any layperson who longs for a deeper sense of wellbeing and meaningful connectedness in life (Hanh, 2015).

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Chapter One: An Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation

> We have a lamp inside us, the lamp of mindfulness, which we can light anytime. The oil of that lamp is our breathing, our steps, and our peaceful smile. We have to light up that lamp of mindfulness so the light will shine out and the darkness will dissipate and cease. Our practice is to light up that lamp. (Hanh, 2011, p.22)

Mindfulness meditation is a beautiful practice that can give rise to holistic benefits for a person's health and overall wellbeing much like a lamp can bring light to darkness. The vast collection of scientific research demonstrating this conclusion is verifying what has been historically believed to be true by Buddhist philosophy for over two thousands years (Fraser, 2013). Yet over recent decades, the modern West has encountered remarkable growth in interest in the concept and practice of mindfulness meditation. This increased interest seems to be at least somewhat due to the surge in related research that demonstrates the widespread benefits that mindfulness meditation can produce (de Vibe et al., 2012). The general public is becoming more and more aware of this practice and its proposed outcomes, especially in terms of stress relief and health improvements (Koster, 2007; Levitin, 2016). I think this emerging curiosity is related to a growing societal longing for a reprieve from the heightening stress and stimulation of modern daily life. More and more people are looking for practical ways in which to cope with anxieties, stressors, and daily challenges in a society that sometimes seems to never stop (de Vibe et al., 2012). We see mindfulness featured on the cover of magazines and as the topic of TED talks, discussed in the media and in the fields of business development and education reform (Koster, 2007). The adoption and application of this practice can be a

valuable strength for any layperson that develops a consistent practice, yet this can be challenging, especially for someone who is not acquainted with spending time in stillness and silence. When these topics are explicated through meditative instructions found in Buddhist scriptures, the techniques by which we can truly settle into a practice and feel its benefits are elucidated. I propose that an interdisciplinary exploration of mindfulness meditation—Buddhist and secular— enriches our understanding of the concept, enhances our practice, and expands our potential to experience deeper-felt benefits.

The effects of a formal practice of mindfulness meditation, in which a person sits in stillness and silence with the intention of becoming aware of one's internal environment, has the potential to subtly, yet profoundly influence the mental processes of attention and awareness (Fraser, 2013). Because these processes serve as the foundational lens through which we see, feel, and think about normative human experience, a shift in our attentional habits can significantly influence our mindsets and the ways in which we attend to our lives. This can serve to enhance our experience of eudemonic wellbeing, especially because the attention of a majority of Westerners is often shifting, multi-tasking, or distractible by a wide variety of technological stimulation (Levitin, 2016). The human brain has evolved to appreciably expand our attentional capabilities. Yet, our brains are still structured to focus on one task at a time, and the technological stimulation we are met with on a daily basis in the contemporary West has been shown to take up a significant share of our limited-capacity attentional resources (Levitin, 2016).

Mindfulness meditation can cause us to intentionally cultivate awareness of our attentional habits, and thus help us to draw our attention toward a greater awareness of

the most important things in our lives, or rather, the things in which we want to attend to in each moment.

In an "era of information overload", in which we hear regular cell phone pings and email alerts as well as live news reports on revolutions happening in our backyards or halfway across the world, each and every piece of information we take in must compete for the limited resources of our attention, making our minds vulnerable to becoming deeply overwhelmed and distressed (Levitin, 2016; Koster, 2007). By removing excess distress from our minds in mindfulness practice, we are relieving our minds of some of the information that takes up our attentional capacity, opening up space for the direction of our attention to the awareness of more positive events, or for an actively positive engagement with the world (Levitin, 2016). Through my personal conversations about this topic over the past few years, people have regularly referred to the mind chatter that persistently narrates their experiences and sometimes even clouds their minds during normal situations or concentrative efforts in meditation. When these difficulties are approached through the wisdom of Buddhist instructions on meditation, the nuances of the practice are clarified, allowing a secular practice and its potential benefits to be enriched.

Mindfulness meditation has been shown to teach people to better meet their attentional demands and cultivate a sense of presence (Brown and Ryan, 2003). For those that feel the stress-related repercussions of our increasingly stimulated and rushed society, mindfulness meditation is a beneficial, practical technique that can be taught and learned. By training our minds to attend only to our internal environment in mindfulness meditation, we can improve our attentional habits and open up a mental space that is

better equipped to attend to information, including the constant stream of thoughts and emotions that occur internally (Levitin, 2016). Once this mental space has been cultivated over time, whereby the brain is acquainted with resting in present-centered awareness, the practice of mindfulness meditation can be developed further, by carrying the mindfulness practice we learn in formal practice into our daily lives, thereby creating what is known in the Buddhist tradition as postmeditation practice. By understanding the Buddhist philosophy regarding this notion, we might be able to enrich our mindfulness practice and cultivate a more profound sense of internal peace and ease in interacting with the external world, as well as with ourselves.

Although research demonstrates many positive effects of mindfulness practice (de Vibe et al., 2012) what I hear time and again as a student and new teacher of this practice is that many people feel hindered or discouraged in developing a meditation practice because of feelings of inadequacy or failure due to their inability to stop thinking or contentedly sit still. Buddhist teachings on meditation clarify that mindfulness meditation at its core is not really about the cessation of thoughts, but rather, about coming to terms with one's thoughts and learning to change one's own attentional habits. Additionally, by going into meditation practice with expectations or pressures to feel something particular, we might be hindering our open-mindedness and preventing ourselves from more easily settling into a confortable practice (Thera, 1998). What I hope to do in this thesis is provide an alternative lens, or rather, an enhanced lens through which we can understand the essence of mindfulness meditation and the practical ways we can overcome challenges in our development of a practice.

First and foremost in this thesis, I propose that the effects of mindfulness meditation can be greatly enriched through a Buddhist understanding of the practice, specifically because the extensive Pali and Sanskrit lexicons—the languages of ancient Buddhist scriptures—clarify the distinctive elements of the concept of mindfulness and the ways in which we can practice it in its truest form. The wide-ranging Pali and Sanskrit lexicon specifically disentangles the ambiguous implications and distinctions within the broad, secularized term of mindfulness. By exploring the historical Buddhist body of knowledge, we may gain a deeper understanding of the most important aspects of practice and thus let go of our inhibitions, thereby establishing the potential for the development of an earnest practice that leads to the fullest experience of holistic benefits.

Mindfulness meditation has been presented as a secular technique that can enhance emotional wellbeing, improve attentional capacity and stress management, and generally enrich one's experience of eudemonic wellbeing (Foltz, 2011; Garland, 2015; Koster, 2007). My interest in mindfulness meditation stems from personal experience, which began with a secular practice and which slowly developed into an exploration of related Buddhist-based traditions. Through this endeavor I became aware that although the practices of mindfulness meditation are strikingly interrelated across traditions, differing meditative epistemologies posit similar tenets in varying ways, and have subtle, yet distinguishable distinctions that are illuminating for a deeper understanding of the practice. This awareness has led me to believe that mindfulness as it is generally understood in Western practice could be enriched through a deeper understanding of a Buddhist construct of mindfulness, which is specifically discussed through the term *sati* in the Satipatthāna Sutta of the Pali Canon, one of the most revered scriptures of

Theravadan Buddhism. A fuller understanding of *sati* can enrich and improve the Western field of mindfulness, which has been critiqued by some as a denaturing appropriation of cultural practices we might not fully understand without a more comprehensive study of the ancient philosophies from which these practices developed (Grossman & Dan, 2011).

A Buddhist-based understanding of mindfulness meditation seems to take related secular approaches a step further, through an acknowledgment of the many challenges that practitioners will experience during meditation, as well as through an elucidation of various, distinct elements of the practice, which are all often referred to in the secular lexicon by the broad and often ambiguous term, *mindfulness*. The mere number of Sanskrit and Pali words that are used to discuss terms like mindfulness, attention, and awareness are strikingly vast, and such elaborations and distinctions help clarify the essence of the elements and tenets central to these techniques. This more complex and deep explication may offer elucidating insight for the Western meditator; especially for one whose understanding of such practices is based solely in a secular library of meditation-related thought without relevant Buddhist knowledge (Grossman & Dan, 2011). Furthermore, the study of mindfulness meditation through a Buddhist lens offers an understanding of the deep importance of a postmeditation practice to any meditation practice; essentially, this implies that any formal practice of mindfulness meditation should give rise to a natural and conscious practice of mindfulness off the mat. According to Buddhist traditions, this is where the true essence of meditation lies, in letting the lamp of mindfulness not only be lit while meditating, but also in our daily lives: in our interactions with others, ourselves, and any experience or challenge we may encounter.

Mindfulness: The Underlying Essence of all Buddhist Meditation

Through a general study of Buddhist-based meditation practices—comprised of practices that are rooted in the Theravada tradition of Southeast Asia, the Mahayana schools of the Japanese Zen tradition, and the Vajrayana tradition of Tibet— it becomes clear that all Buddhist traditions are united by a lens of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Each of these traditions is composed of a wide variety of subtraditions, differing foundational texts, and varying forms of practice, yet they are all united by an ethically grounded framework—practice-based and conceptual—of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The phrase "ethically-grounded" refers to the notion that these practices are oriented around some sort of intention of personal, ethical improvement. Such an improvement can be related to many different things: principles, values, emotional and mental clarity, or even one's behavior and interactions with oneself or others. Various forms and disciplines of Buddhist meditation practices are all united not by the ethics laid out by a specific culture or religion, but rather, through the ethics of aspiring to bring conscientiousness to as many aspects of daily life as possible, which can be achieved through the training of mindfulness in formal practice, and through the infusion of one's understanding of mindfulness into the experiences of distressing challenges and ordinary encounters.

> Life as it is understood in the Dispensation of the Buddha is unsatisfactory until one can through moral joy, meditative tranquility and wise understanding reach mental invulnerability to suffering. The Way of Mindfulness is understanding and tranquility illumined by a bright moral character. (Thera, 1998, p. 11)

In this sense, the way of mindfulness leads a person to live a life that is more grounded in morality and understanding. Although this does not itself equate to an ethical belief system, mindfulness is about establishing a mindset that encourages people to live more ethically. It is about waking up from our habitual natures of mind and reminding ourselves to always try to practice our practice. Buddhist traditions propose that by becoming more aware and attentive through formal practice and tuning in to the subjective mindsets we have grown accustomed to, a meditator naturally begins to notice and feel more internally, and subsequently notice and feel more for those in the external world. By doing this, it is believed that mindfulness practitioners naturally begin to be less vulnerable to mental suffering, in terms of one's experience of distress and heightened stress reactivity (Levitin, 2016). Some might assume that this technique will increase empathy and thus intensify one's vulnerability to suffering through the extension of internal feelings about other's distress. The important distinction here is that mindfulness meditation specifically increases compassion rather than empathy. The conscious cultivation of compassion in mindfulness meditation has been shown to increase a person's care about another being, without increasing negative affect about the other's distress (Klimecki et al., 2012). A recent study that delved into this topic through the analysis of functional neural plasticity in regards to the meditative cultivation of compassion actually showed that the "deliberate cultivation of compassion offers a new coping strategy that fosters positive affect even when confronted with the distress of others" (Klimecki et al., 2012).

In Buddhist philosophy, distress and a lack of awareness are two elements that are presented as the root of much our suffering, some of which can be overcome through the

application of mindfulness to our daily experiences. The reason for this proposition is that we are apt to get caught up in the mental narratives that naturally arise to process our subjective experiences, and which often are negatively amplified with stress reactivity. It is very easy to lose touch with a more objective perspective on the things that habitually stress us out or put us on edge. Mindfulness meditation leads to the conscious cultivation of a broader, more objective perspective on our life experiences. By simply beginning to attend to our internal environment more and give our minds more time to sit with all the information we process daily, we begin to become more aware of the broader picture of our existence, which allows us to naturally take a step away from our automatic, and often distressful reactions to stress (de Vibe et al., 2012).

Buddhist scriptures argue that it is only through deliberate mental training that we can awaken and actually enjoy the moments of joy and contentedness that are interspersed throughout even the most distressing of days (Thera, 1998). These same scriptures reason that stress is an inevitable part of human existence, and that distress is a natural reaction to it, yet through the practice of formal meditation and postmeditation practice, we can change our reaction to stress and experience more of the good in life, and less of the distress we are accustomed to. Furthermore, Buddhist philosophy suggests that once we achieve a sense of detachment from our typical sense of stress reactivity in consistent formal practice, compassion and a propensity to act morally (according to one's own system of ethics) begin to naturally arise, and which should be maintained and reinforced through our engagement in postmeditation practice (Chadha, 2015).

In the simplest of terms, mindfulness can be defined as being mindful of the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Thich Nhat Hanh, a modern Buddhist monk and one

of the most well-known Zen masters in the world, explains how to practice mindfulness in an illuminating way, in a poetic excerpt called 'One Hundred Percent:'

> Be there truly. Be there with 100 percent of your self. In every moment of your daily life. That is the essence of true Buddhist meditation. Each of us knows that we can do that, so let us train to live each moment of our daily life deeply. That is why I like to define *mindfulness* as the energy that helps us to be there 100 percent. It is the energy of your true presence. (Hanh, 2011, p.2)

The task of 'being there truly,' or being there with "100 percent of your self" can be interpreted in many ways. Each tradition and practice posits its own beliefs and ways by which such a seemingly simple, yet profoundly challenging task can be practiced, but the foundational and overarching purpose persists: to be mindful of the present. What this means and entails will be discussed according to various Buddhist traditions, as well as through the lens of a secular, conceptual framework for Mindfulness Based Meditation, which consists of varying secular approaches to interrelated, but distinct forms of mindfulness meditation.

Due to the diverse array of forms of categorization that can distinguish meditation techniques, —including, but not limited to, culture of origination, religion, subject of focus, and form— I will be speaking of secular forms of mindfulness meditation under the general framework, Mindfulness Based Meditation. Included in this chosen framework are three types of meditation: concentrative meditation, loving-kindness meditation, and mindfulness meditation. Despite its name, concentrative meditation is

considered a type of mindfulness meditation practice, as mindfulness forms the foundation of practice. If we consider mindfulness to be a descriptor for meditation form, we can study the various forms of mindfulness *based* meditation practices (including those that are based in mindfulness, yet are not technically termed 'mindfulness meditation'), thus allowing a more comprehensive understanding of the principal components that persist across varying forms of practice.

The Principal Components and Mechanisms of Mindfulness Meditation

Cultivating a mental space that is accustomed to stillness and silence offers a person the opportunity to become more generally aware, in terms of awareness of oneself as an embodied being, of one's attentional habits, and of the narratives that typically inhabit the mind. The mental space that is created in mindfulness meditation practice allows a practitioner to learn about one's attentional capacities and one's attentional habits. This implies a conscious exploration of the way our mind, and thus attention, typically work. This tends to lend itself to the meditator coming into a deeper state of awareness of oneself and one's experiences, which forms the foundation for inner transformation of one's perception. In Buddhist traditions, this inner transformation is spoken about in terms of the path to Enlightenment. Yet in secular practice, we might simply see this as a form of mental training of attention and awareness that can cause a change in resting awareness and in one's mental perception of the internal and external world (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, Fraser 2013).

I propose that the principal components of mindfulness meditation—across traditions and discipline—are awareness and attention. There are considerably more

mental processes involved in each practice, yet all mindfulness meditation techniques seem to be rooted in transformations of one's awareness through conscious shifts in attention in a compassionate, non-judgmental way. This transformation can lead to a change in perception that can be discussed in terms of apperception, which can be defined as "introspective self-consciousness," and which serves as the means and the end of mindfulness meditation—and which will be discussed thoroughly in Chapter Three. (*apperception,* Merriam-Webster, 2011).

Awareness of our attentional habits establishes the foundation for our capability to shift attention, which establishes the potential for a shift in terms of how we perceive everything from our experiences and other people, to our thoughts and our emotions. This can cause a shift in the way we experience the stress response, as we can learn to meet challenges and stresses in a more mindful way. An understanding of Buddhist tenets elucidates the most approachable and beneficial ways by which mindfulness meditation can be practiced, therefore widening the potential of practitioners to attain deeper-felt benefits of the practice. Still, limitations in research and current gaps in knowledge prevent us from jumping to far-reaching conclusions, thus this paper should be viewed as the title conveys, as an *exploration* of mindfulness meditation and the potential benefits it may offer Western practitioners.

The Significance of Mindfulness Meditation

The reason for the diversity in the operationalization, categorization, and discussion of mindfulness based meditation is largely the result of a recent surge in interest in the modern West. As the West has becomes more and more developed and

technologically advanced, the stimulation we experience on a daily basis continues to increase, leading to an absence of quiet, personal space, and simultaneously, leading to a great deal of constant pressures on our attentional capacity (Levitin, 2016). This ever-increasing and intensifying stimulation and accompanying lack of personal, quiet space seems to be contributing to the recent rise in stress-related disorders and illnesses that are rising to epidemic proportions. The experience of heightened or chronic stress is becoming normalized, and because of this, many techniques have been developed to manage this, including mindfulness meditation stress reduction programs. Not only does mindfulness meditation offer the time and space for quiet and stillness, but it also holds the potential to evoke in practitioners a more discerning perspective that is less encumbered by the subjective, habitual tendencies of the mind. Thus, mindfulness meditation not only addresses the stress a person has already experienced, but also allows a practitioner to develop a subtly different mental perspective that helps them better manage stress in the future (Jain, 2007; Levitin, 2016).

> We are apt to get so caught up in the urgency of everything we have to do, and so caught up in our heads and in what we *think* is important, that it is easy to fall into a state of chronic tension, anxiety, and perpetual distraction that continually drives our lives and easily becomes our default mode of operating, our autopilot. (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

A Mindful Practice

The term *practice* is central to Buddhist teachings. The fact that mindfulness meditation is called a practice is essential to what it actually teaches. Because Western societies are highly goal-oriented, we are prone to focus on the results of a practice or experience instead of the practice or experience itself (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Needless to say, there are indeed goals and intentions inherent in mindfulness meditation practice, yet Buddhist scriptures encourage practitioners to try to engage in an open state of mind, by dropping our expectations and truly embodying the notion of mental openness, in which we are genuinely open to whatever happens in the moment. This practice of openness seems to cultivate a sense of presence by opening our minds, bodies, and hearts to whatever thoughts, sensations, or feelings we might need to work through to release some of our tensions (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

The notion that relaxation is a central goal and experience of meditation seems to in some ways undermine the difficulty of the practice of regularly sitting in stillness and silence. Buddhist philosophy acknowledges the many challenges that are inevitable over the course of the development of a meditation practice, and Buddhist scriptures specifically address the ways by which we can overcome those challenges. These difficulties include feelings of restlessness, impatience, mind chatter, and inadequacy, for which Buddhist texts note are usually experienced during the beginning stages of development of practice, and should be addressed through persistence, patience, and vigilance in order to sustain the practice and get over the early hurdles (Chadha, 2015). A Western understanding of the Buddhist perception of these inevitable challenges might encourage practitioners to continue to sit in practice despite difficulties.

Such propositions about sitting through difficulty and 'working through intrapsychic events' immediately give rise to questions about the mechanisms by which these effects are produced (Semple, 2015). How do we 'work through' intrapsychic events? How do these transformations in our internal world—changes in attention and awareness— work in relation to the stress response and our experience of stress? Such questions will be explored in Chapter Four.

The density of the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary discussion of a practice like mindfulness meditation yields a diversity of insight as mindfulness based meditation encompasses a wide variety of practices, forms, and philosophies. Still, inherent in all traditions—Buddhist and secular—seems to be an underlying current of *sati*, or mindfulness. Through the exploration of a general framework of Buddhist and secular-based mindfulness meditation practices, we find that attention and awareness serve as principal components across traditions, whether spoken about through these terms or analogous terms in other languages and epistemological frameworks. Through the engagement of these principal components in formal meditation practice—and through the conscious engagement of those practices in informal practice (postmeditation practice)—it seems that holistic benefits can be attained for a modern, Western layperson, especially for those that feel a longing for deeper interconnectedness: to oneself, to others, and to the greater world. This sense of interconnectedness serves to cultivate a sense of more contented wellbeing, which could be beneficial for any person who finds a suitable practice and wishes for a space that allows the cultivation of a more grounded, fully alive, and thriving sense of self and life experience.

Chapter Two: The Ancient Origins of Mindfulness Meditation Practice
Buddhist Roots and Secular Branches

"Modern times often cause us to go on automatic pilot, continually multitasking and busying our lives with digital stimulation, information overload, and schedules that stress our brains and overwhelm our lives. Finding time to pause amidst this chaos has become an urgent need few of us take the time to satisfy." (Hanson, 2009, p. vi)

Proliferation of Mindfulness Interest in the Modern West

The term *mindfulness meditation* assumes many roles in the modern world. The recent surge of Western interest in mindfulness meditation—a practice that is strongly rooted in ancient, Buddhist traditions—begs the question, 'why *now?'* The concept of mindfulness has been in existence for thousands of years, though it was not termed as such until the past century. Mindfulness meditation has claimed a remarkable space of attention and interest in the contemporary West. From the proliferation of related scientific research and the implementation of wide-spread applications in the health care system, to routine media attention and ordinary household conversation, it seems that mindfulness meditation continually expands its market and audience, presenting itself as a healthful and therapeutic mind-body practice based on cultivating awareness of the present moment (Fraser, 2013).

This paper aims to investigate mindfulness mediation across Buddhist and secular traditions, exploring the principal components of a mindfulness meditation practice, incorporating Buddhist teachings that are illuminating for an enhanced understanding and adoption of the practice. This paper intends to delve into the promising benefits of mindfulness meditation, which are diverse and seem especially beneficial for those who

find themselves longing for a deeper sense of connectedness in a modern West that is becoming increasingly more stressed over time (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). These promising outcomes lie hand in hand with a discussion of the reasons for the proliferation of mindfulness meditation practice in the twenty-first century in the West, specifically because it seems that more and more people are seeking practical techniques to be able to handle the restlessness, anxiety, and chronic stress that are increasingly characterizing our daily lives. Not only can mindfulness meditation offer relief for the symptoms of stress, but it can also open the doorway into a new form of perception, *apperception*, a pure form of consciousness developed from the mindful perception of internal events and experiences, which can allow the positive transformation of a person's natural and habitual mindset and perception of everyday encounters (Brown and Ryan, 2004).

The reasons for the recent proliferation of the practice of and familiarity with mindfulness meditation in the West seems to be directly related to the benefits that such a practice offers its practitioners. From an improved clarity of mind and attentional capacity, to an enhancement in emotional regulation and stress-management, mindfulness meditation seems to offer potential benefits in a widespread array of cognitive faculties that are foundational to human functioning and wellbeing (Fraser, 2013). The claims that have been made regarding the effects of mindfulness meditation are sometimes far-reaching though, such as presenting it as a sort of panacea for the epidemic of depression, anxiety, and stress-related disorders that has recently arisen in the States (Heuman, 2014). I do not present mindfulness meditation practice as a cure-all, or even necessarily a suitable practice for all. Rather, mindfulness meditation seems to offer a potential method by which laypersons of the modern West might be able to connect more deeply with

themselves through the development of a deeper attention and sense of awareness to the present moment (Heuman, 2014). When a Buddhist lens is attached to these teachings, we see that establishing a deeper connection to oneself naturally leads to a deeper connection with others, the external world, and the natural beauty inherent in life as an embodied being. And through sustained practice, we see that these effects not only lead to an enriched eudemonic wellbeing, but also to an expanding capacity for compassion. This is not to say that people who practice mindfulness meditation are more compassionate. This is to say that when people practice mindfulness meditation consistently, especially through the establishment of a practice with an understanding of the Buddhist tradition, they often become more compassionate than they felt before they started to practice.

A Secular Framework for Mindfulness Meditation: *Mindfulness Based Meditation*

For the purposes of this paper, meditation techniques will be considered under the umbrella term and general framework of "Mindfulness Based Meditation" (Siegel et al., 2008; cited in Manuello et al., 2015). This framework was developed from the analysis of a plethora of mindfulness-related meditation forms, and is composed of three overarching types of formal meditation practice: concentration meditation, mindfulness meditation, and loving-kindness-meditation, all of which are included under the broad term, Mindfulness Based Meditation (Siegel et al., 2008). Each of these three forms will be described subsequently, and their differences explicated.

Concentration Meditation

Concentration meditation, as the name denotes, is any meditation technique that is characterized by placing a specific focus or concentration upon a focal object (Siegel et al., 2008). This object is not necessarily a physical object, though it can be. This focal object simply has to be a physical or mental subject of concentration. It is commonplace for this object to be one's breath or a mantra—a mantra is word or phrase that is said to hold spiritual meaning, especially when mentally repeated in meditation— but it can also be any particular object that the practitioner intends to gently and continually bring back to attention and awareness through a conscious, concerted effort of concentration and focus (Sedlmeier et al., 2012). The guidelines for practicing concentration meditation are usually grounded in notions of gently bringing back awareness to the focal object each and every time the mind wanders, no matter how many times this happens (Siegel et al., 2008). This type of meditation improves our attentional capabilities over time, specifically by encouraging a deeper awareness of our concentration habits, and then cultivating a refinement of those concentration habits by training our minds to come back to the focal object every time we lose our object of concentration. "While it can be distributing to notice how frequently we are mindless, and how much of our lives we wish away," awareness of our automatic state of mind, or mindlessness, is the first step towards cultivating mindfulness (Sedlmeier et al., 2012).

This notion of mind wandering will be discussed in the concluding chapter, but it is important to emphasize that the cessation of mind wandering is not the purpose of meditation (Jha, 2007, Manuello, 2015). Rather, it is to begin to notice our thoughts and mental state, and to hopefully expand the gaps between thoughts as we practice more and more. The purpose of *concentration meditation* is not to sit in perfect concentration—this

would potentially impede the practical necessity and functionality of the practice itself anyway. The practice is simply a practice of continued return to concentration on a specified object, in which regular, consistent practice of return to focus has been demonstrated to affect attentional abilities through the enhancement of sustained vigilance and the inhibition of distraction (Semple, 2015).

Loving-Kindness Meditation

A second category of meditation practice in Siegel's Mindfulness Based Meditation framework is termed *loving-kindness meditation.* The focus of this form of meditation is on placing one's concentration on a positive, uplifting phrase, and is thus also a form of concentrative meditation, as a focal object of attention is chosen for the mediation. The chosen statement (or statements) can be secular or spiritual, personal and or about the greater world. In *loving-kindness meditation*, the practitioner is supposed to continuously repeat a chosen statement, gently allowing it to form a patterned, circular mental motion until the meditation is complete (Siegel et al., 2008). As the name of this form of meditation suggests, *loving-kindness meditation* does indeed encourage the practice to be grounded in a loving and kind foundational nature. This not only means to say loving, kind words to oneself or about one's intention repetitiously, but this also means one should intend to respond lovingly and kindly when the mind inevitably wanders (Manuello, 2015). This mind wandering implies thoughts that are not the chosen phrase, and when the meditator becomes aware of this extraneous thought, rather than mentally disparaging oneself for thinking of other things, the meditator should try to gently draw attention back to the phrase. This also means that the entire meditation

practice and all the subtleties that surround making time and space for practice are informed by an increasingly more loving and kind nature, the positive effects of which have been demonstrated to weave through a life by lining more thoughts and experiences in postmeditation with a more loving and kind nature (Siegel et al., 2008, Jain at al, 2007). By learning to create a more kind and loving mental space in meditation, we are naturally learning to create that same space for postmeditation in our daily lives, which can be largely beneficial for stress management and the enhancement of eudemonic meaning in life (Ryan, 2000).

Mindfulness Meditation

The last of the three categories of meditation practice that falls under Siegel's general Mindfulness Based Meditation framework is plainly termed *mindfulness meditation*. With this form of practice, there is not a specified focal object of intended focus of attention. Instead, practitioners are instructed to place their attention on whatever drifts through consciousness at any moment in time. This implies consciously placing one's attention on one's automatic thinking and habits of processing, without emotionally engaging in narratives that might arise, and simply watching one's mental space as if from a detached perspective. One might think then, that mindfulness meditation is simply a form of active thinking. Active thinking is differentiated from passive thinking through a conscious engagement with one's thoughts. The thinking that is present in mindfulness meditation could be viewed as a form of active thinking, as we are attempting to attend to our thoughts, but only a specified form, as the engagement with which we want to observe our thoughts is not overly-analytical or judgment-based, but instead grounded in

a very detached, observant, attentive, and perceptive manner (Jain, 2007) The purpose is to continually return one's attention to whatever intrapsychic events are occurring in the present moment, with a lens of non-judgment and acceptance (Siegel et al., 2008). Essentially, practitioners are practicing a technique of simply being and resting in natural consciousness, with the ancillary intention of consciously trying to be mindfully aware of one's experience of *being*. Cognitive theories about the mechanisms of this type of receptive meditation are grounded in bottom-up functions of the brain, in which…

> Mindfulness seeks to bring attention directly to the stream of sensory data entering experience through each of the sense doors…as well as to the arising thoughts and images in the mind. In doing so, it steers attention away from the many "upper level" schemas, narratives, beliefs, and other conceptual maps we normally use to guide our way through a day's experience. (Siegel et al., 2008)

This last form of meditation is a receptive form of meditation, as opposed to the first two types, *Concentration Meditation* and *Loving-Kindness Meditation,* which are both concentrative forms, meaning they have a specific object of focus. An understanding of the Buddhist outlook on the differences in these two general types of meditation and their purposes will help Westerners adopt the form of mindfulness meditation that is most suitable for them. In the Theravada tradition, which serves as the foundation for the later Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, it is said that only by practicing *samatha* (concentrative practice) one can later reach his or her potential in *vipassana* practice (insight practice). That is, according to Buddhist thought, one should establish a practice of concentrative meditation before moving on to a practice of receptive meditation. To

create a mental state that is conducive for insight, one must first be able to concentrate without hampering distractions. By enhancing the mind's ability to deter distractions and concentrate with vigilance on an intended object of meditation, the mind is essentially being prepared to rest in a state of open awareness that can be receptive to thoughts or sensations that transcend our habitual, subjective perception of the world, and move into more intuitive or insightful ways of understanding the present moment as an embodied being.

Other theoretical frameworks for mindfulness meditation categorize various forms of practice in different ways, but each framework seems to cover the majority of forms of meditation practice that are established in mindfulness. Within a twofold framework that was shaped for a study on attention regulation and monitoring in meditation, researchers termed one form of mindfulness meditation as *focused attention meditation*, and the other as *open monitoring meditation*. *Focused attention meditation* is analogous to Siegel's form of *concentration meditation*: a practice based on the intention of sustaining selective attention upon an object of intended focus. Just as with Siegel's framework, the object of intended focus for this practice can be a mental or physical objet, or even a localized sensation, like the breath. The second category of Jha's twofold framework is called *open monitoring meditation*, which is analogous to Siegel's form of *mindfulness meditation*, as the practice instructs to non-reactively rest one's awareness on one's own stream of moment-to-moment experience. The third form of meditation in Siegel's aforementioned three-fold framework*, loving-kindness meditation,* would potentially be categorized as a type of *focused meditation* in Jha's two-fold framework, in which the uplifting phrase that is repeated is viewed as the object of intended focus (Jha, 2008).

As can be seen, the same practices can be discussed in quite a few ways, which differ linguistically, but are not disparate in essence. So what unites all of these strains of mindfulness based meditation? What does the term *mindfulness*, which seems to characterize them all, really involve and imply? A Buddhist approach might argue that each form is strongly rooted in *sati*, a Pali term that is often translated as mindfulness. Western meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn explains the Buddhist concept of *sati* as a state of mind, which is characterized by "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p 68). According to Kabat-Zinn, *sati* is the state of mind that arises through the practice of mindfulness.

Buddhist Origins of Mindfulness Practice

The diverse array of mindfulness-related meditation practices that exist in the contemporary Western world is a direct result of the natural evolution of various religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions that exist and involve mindfulness. One such tradition is the plural practice of Buddhism, which is comprised of many different lineages that evolved from a single, coherent philosophical framework on ancient, Buddhist philosophy. This single framework, which claims that the practices of meditation and mindfulness are necessary components of a life oriented toward enlightenment, evolved over thousands of years, morphing into many related, but distinct Buddhist and secularized mindfulness practices and philosophies (Chadha, 2015). Because of this, we can discuss mindfulness in terms of practically all schools of Buddhism—Abhidarma, Cittamātra, Madhyamaka, etc. Mindfulness can be discussed in terms of many different religious and philosophical frameworks, but a Buddhist-based

discussion seems to enrich a secular understanding of mindfulness, specifically because of the in-depth, ancient teachings that Buddhist philosophy is established in. Additionally, a Buddhist dialogue about mindfulness seems to encourage a wider scope of care, for oneself and others, without necessarily implying spiritual beliefs. A sense of care and compassion for oneself and all other sentient beings serves as the undercurrent of all Buddhist practice and belief (Chadha, 2014).

Although there are differences between various Buddhist lineages and traditions, the essence of mindfulness meditation—which is defined, described, and discussed in the introductory chapter— persists across diverse traditions (Chadha, 2015). The secular mindfulness practices and related meditative health techniques that have promulgated in the contemporary West have undoubtedly formed with a direct or indirect connection to these other traditions happening in other parts of the world, so my hope is to bring essential Buddhist concepts to the forefront of contemporary discussion of mindfulness meditation in the West. "A better understanding of a Buddhist philosophical framework will not only help situate meditation practice in its originating tradition, but it will also clarify a Buddhist perspective on consciousness," which is largely based on the intention of positively expanding one's consciousness, much through mental meditative training. This expansion of consciousness is based on the Buddhist goal of personal enlightenment. Although a belief in the Buddhist path to enlightenment implies conviction in the more spiritual expanse of Buddhist principles, the Buddhist notion of the expansion of consciousness itself can still be very illuminating for a secular practice of mindfulness meditation even for someone who does not believe in ultimate enlightenment, specifically because the mental training that the Buddhist framework on

consciousness encourages can help practitioners adopt a more insightful, caring, and conscientious mindset. So, it seems that an interdisciplinary approach to mindfulness meditation engenders not only the well-known secular outcomes of relaxation, enhanced stress relief, and improved emotional regulation, but also an expansion of consciousness that will lead to the experience of more care and compassion (Sedlmeir et al., 2012; Chadha, 2015).

Because I propose that the Western conception of mindfulness can be enhanced through a discussion of mindfulness in terms of specific concepts central to Buddhist thought, it seems that a basic understanding of the distinctions of the three main traditions is requisite. The explication of the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions will help facilitate an understanding of why there exist so many different elements of mindfulness in the Pali and Sanskrit lexicon, the two languages that compose most of the earliest and most sacred Buddhist scriptures. The Theravada school, practiced heavily in countries of Southeast Asia, places ultimate focus on liberation and the original words of the Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, regarding the existence of human suffering and each person's ability to find freedom from that suffering through compassion and mindfulness (Thera, 1998). Within the Theravada school lays the practice of Vipassana, a practice that places its focus on insight and is one of the more well-known practices in the West. The Mahayana school, practiced largely in Northern Asia, focuses not only on personal liberation, but also on full enlightenment for the betterment of all sentient beings, specifically through placing a greater focus on compassion-based practices. The later Mahayana tradition builds on the Theravada and earlier Mahayana traditions, and also adheres to the Tripitaka, or Pāli Canon. Lastly, the Vajrayana tradition, mostly practiced

in Tibet and other areas in the Himalayan plateau, builds on the Theravada and Mahayana schools, incorporating esoteric ideas that lie beyond the scope of this paper's realm of discussion.

A Pali Term for Mindfulness: Sati

The Pali term *sati* is most often regarded as the Buddhist translation of mindfulness. A discussion of *sati* helps elucidate a richer Theravadan conception of mindfulness. The term *sati* stems from the Satipatthāna Sutta, a Theravadan scripture that is often translated as the "Way of Mindfulness" and which is often revered as one of the most important texts of the Pali Canon (Deatherage, 1975). The entirety of this text is structured around the Buddha's instructions to cultivate the simple, yet profound mental faculty that has been termed in modernity as 'mindfulness.' Soma Thera's commentary on the Satipatthāna Sutta serves to explicate the many meanings of Buddha's words, and although this paper cannot look into the full breadth of Thera's 160-page exposition, the discussion of a few certain concepts might be helpful for Westerners to understand what is really meant by the cultivation of *sati*.

The name of the aforementioned Sutta, Satipatthāna, can be split into two distinct words, *sati* and *patthāna*. *Patthāna* refers to a starting point or setting off for something. In this regard, it is the foundation that must be established before the wisdom of *sati* can be acquired. The entirety of this Sutta is about the foundation of a practice of mindfulness, which goes to show how multifaceted such a practice is. Something central to the cultivation of *sati* is the concept of 'remembering.' According to Buddhist thought, it is not enough to practice mindfulness in formal meditation practice, but just as

important (if not more so) is letting it infuse the rest of one's life through a constant practice of 'remembering.' In Western society, we might practice formal mindfulness meditation, and then forget about it the rest of the day, or we might make it an intention to practice mindfulness throughout the day, but we forget, or we get lost in the urgency of work and everyday life. When we forget, we might act mindlessly, and then once we come back to formal practice and become aware of our mindlessness, we might feel as if we are failing, because we did not stand by our intention to be mindful. What is important about the Buddhist tradition in this regard is that is presents this 'remembering' as a very difficult practice, which is why the task is made more explicit through the guidelines of scripture and foundational elements of this 'remembering.' Thera talks about this concept with reference to the terms *patissati* (remembrance), *dharanata* (bearing in mind), and *saranata* (recollection) (Thera, 1998). Simply setting an intention to practice mindfulness or to attempt to remember the practice throughout the day may not allow the meditator to practice 'remembering' in the fullest capacity. If we think of remembering as a challenge that involves numerous elements, as opposed to being a simple task, we might become less discouraged when we forget to practice mindfulness. According to Buddhist philosophy, to remember means to bear in mind the practice, as well as the ways in which we can remind ourselves to practice. It also means recalling our past experience of the practice and the challenges we have been met with to remember to practice. Essentially, it is all about creating an internal mental space that is focused not only on our intention to remember, but genuinely focused on the reasons we need to remember, the ways we can remember, and the reflective process it takes to progressively build this remembrance up in formal meditation practice as well as postmeditation practice in our everyday lives.

Other qualities that characterize *sati* that are central to a Buddhist understanding of the term are sustained energy and earnestness. When these qualities are practiced, it is said that mindfulness is practiced at the highest level (*atthato hi so satiya avippavaso*), which means that mindfulness begins to characterize all moments of daily life in an earnest way, or in other words, mindfulness is not neglected. One of Buddha's last oral teachings was summed up as "strive with earnestness…all wholesome things are founded on earnestness, converge on earnestness, and earnestness is to be considered as the most excellent of them" (Thera, 1998). The active, all-pervasive form of mindfulness that is discussed in the Sanskrit phrase previously mentioned is not necessarily a realistic goal for a new Western meditator, but Buddhist scriptures explain that the more earnest we are in our efforts, the closer we are to come to this realization.

Traditionally, the essence of mindfulness has been discussed as the "the heart" of Buddhist meditation (Thera, 1962). The Abhidharmakośa, a classic scripture of Theravadan Buddhism, specifically lays out the six steps of *smrti (*a Sanskrit term that is often translated as mindfulness) as "counting, following, fixing, observing, modifying, and purifying," which should be experienced in meditation practice, or Bhāvanā, (Chadha, 2015). These steps all refer to keeping some form of sustained attention on the breath, through which meditators can purify their thoughts and mind by focusing their concentration on a perceptible internal sensation and engaging with how things actually are in the present moment. Additionally, focusing on the lengthening of rhythmic inhales and exhales facilitates the arousal of the parasympathetic nervous system, which relaxes the body and allows the mind's entrance into a meditative mental state. Cognitive research on breath-based meditation has shown that an emphasis on breathing techniques

in meditation serves as a mechanism "to restore physiological and cognitive reserves for optimal human performance," specifically by balancing the autonomic nervous system, which regularly compensates for an over-arousal of the sympathetic nervous system and must support itself against routine offenses of distress (Carter and Carter III, 2016).

Engagement with Dharmas: the Buddhist Conception of Truth

The conceptual result of genuinely engaging with *sati* and breath-based meditation training, according to Buddhist philosophy, is the engagement with *dharmas*. The Abhidharmakośa asserts that the truest practice of mindfulness will result in the encounter of *dharmas*, the true nature of all things. An engagement with and an understanding of *dharmas* is supposedly what mediates the connection between meditation and knowledge of truth, which is the ultimate necessity (Chadha, 2015).

The word *Dharma* is used in the Sanskrit and Pali lexicon multidimensionally. *Dharma* is a "general term for the teachings and path of the Buddha Shakyamuni" (Tsomo, 2016). Additionally, *dharmas* are considered to be basic units of consciousness. Just as we consider an atom the basic constituent of matter in space and time, Buddhist philosophy considers a *dharma* as the basic constituent of all true perception, experience, and all components of consciousness. The key word here is *true.* Buddhist tradition claims any *true* thought, sensation, judgment, and experience to be a dharma. What does this mean, practically? Mindfulness meditation is said to begin to reveal an understanding of *dharmas*, and thus unveil a lens of wisdom simply by becoming more aware of our consciousness. By sitting in stillness and silence, and by becoming aware of our internal reality, we begin to cultivate a perceptive mental nature that will allow us to

better discriminate between truth and falseness. In terms of a thought, this means that when we are lost in a train of thoughts, and then we become aware of it, we can become aware of the *dharma* by applying a lens of mindfulness to the thought. If we are questioning a plan of action, and constantly thinking about what the right decision might be, we undergo a mental process of mindful *remembering,* and then subsequently come into an understanding of the *dharma*. This does not mean we automatically have a plan of action or decision in mind, but we can settle down from our on-going mental narratives and sense of stress reactivity and thus create a calm mental space that allows for the *dharma* to naturally inhabit our minds.

"Mindfulness unveils the structure of conscious experience by bringing into awareness the factors that constitute any given conscious state" (Chadha, 2015, p.78). This unveiling of the structure of conscious experience refers to a sort of mental dissection of our conscious state. While sitting in mindfulness meditation, we become more aware of our resting state of mind, and through consistent practice and a development of uninterrupted experience with the principal components of meditation, awareness and attention (which will be discussed in depth in the following chapter), we develop an ability to discriminate subjective and objective elements of our conscious state. In other words, by sitting in mindfulness meditation (according to the Abhidharma tradition) we can develop a mental ability to discriminate between the reality of the present moment and the subjective mental narrative that tends to naturally and automatically arise to recount personal human experience (Chadha, 2015).

Although all Buddhist traditions and secular meditation programs might not correspond in the belief in *dharmas* as the constitutive elements of consciousness, these

contemplative practices all seem to have a corresponding foundational belief in connecting with the most true, elemental, natural, or constitutive form of all things. The purpose in discussing *dharmas* is not to assert this concept as a factual concept, but rather, to expand the discussion of connecting to truth, or to connecting to the most foundational elements of our psyche. The overall purpose in connecting to truth refers to the meditative decomposition of false conceptions, and the subsequent distancing of oneself from the subjective mind chatter that routinely distorts one's vision of the world (Chadha, 2015).

As Chadha explains in a research study on a Buddhist epistemological framework for mindfulness mediation, "the task of mindfulness meditation is to get at the basic structure of the conscious states, beginning with attending to the activity of breathing" (Chadha, 2015). Each lineage of Buddhist thought—and also each form of non-secularized or secularized mindfulness—might have varying instructions or elements of focus for their respective form of mindfulness, yet it seems that the essence of mindfulness practice endures across tradition: concentration, self-reflection, and breath-awareness as a means to cultivate a deeper awareness of the self. Usually this deeper understanding of the self also yields a deeper understanding of and connection to others. According to Buddhist tradition, this deeper connection naturally leads to the taking up of a more compassionate nature and the experience of a happier and more fulfilling sense of holistic wellbeing, precisely because we cultivate distance from the fleeting distress of our subjective experience, which opens up attentional space to draw our awareness to feelings of contentedness or peacefulness (Fraser, 2013). The act of sitting down in meditation itself can lead to the adoption of a more caring nature, as Westerners typically

adopt the practice for reasons associated with self-care or self-improvement. Additionally, as we begin to strip down our typical attentional filters, we become more in tune with the reality of our internal experience, and subsequently better understand the complicated nature of our intrapsychic environment. We can then relate that understanding to others, as all human beings experience uniquely challenging internal environments. This deeper understanding of our intrapsychic mental space has been associated with the engagement in more prosocial behaviors and personal health behaviors, specifically because we can relate to the difficulties that each and every individual's mind must endure and work through (Foltz, 2011).

Contemporary Mindfulness Concepts Elucidated with Buddhist Thought

Compassion and the Interconnectedness of Sentient Beings

One of the central components of Buddhism that offers insight for the contemporary discussion of mindfulness meditation is the concept of the interconnectedness of all sentient beings. This is an important point for many reasons, one of which is related to *social dukkha*, or the collective suffering of all beings (Purser and Loy, 2013). Any form of mindfulness meditation within a Buddhist framework is deeply rooted in an intention to relieve suffering, not only for oneself, but to relieve the world of some of its collective suffering. From a secular perspective, on the other hand, meditation is precisely laid out as a technique to connect to the self, through self-reflection as a means to connect to the component of humanity that is the *I,* or the *me (*Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Although this self-reflection is usually established with good intentions (for self-improvement or health benefits), widening one's meditation intentions to include others' relief of suffering can actually enhance the experience and results of

meditation for the individual. Our thoughts, words, and behaviors can be affected through a lens of mindfulness, and our thoughts, words, and behaviors naturally affect others through our interactions and decisions on a daily basis. If we reflect on this interconnectedness, we might realize how much we influence others, and thus, by practicing mindfulness meditation, we are affecting others in addition to ourselves. Although this might happen regardless if we are aware or not—of all the ways our personal practice can affect others—taking on a less self-centered approach to meditation might lead to a deeper cultivation of compassion for others, as well as an adoption of a mindset that has been shown to lead to more prosocial behavior (Foltz, 2011). One of the reasons for this outcome might be due to the fact that when people feel they are doing something for others, they might feel more encouraged to maintain their practice (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2010). When meditators confront challenges through their practice—for example, feeling as if they are not experiencing immediate benefits or feeling a lack of motivation to sit in formal practice—they might feel more motivated to continue practice if they keep a Buddhist framework in mind, in the sense that relieving oneself of suffering literally relieves the world of some collective suffering, and additionally, practicing meditation can affect oneself and how the meditator interacts with others, therefore affecting others as well. It seems, from research as well as anecdotal accounts of meditation experience, that these tenets become more and more clear as personal practice accrues (Thera, 1998). It is difficult for one to understand the interconnectedness of all beings without having a meditative understanding of the internal mental states that result from meditation practice, but it should be acknowledged

that compassion and a sense of connection with others often naturally arises with sustained mindfulness practice (Foltz, 2011).

> Compassion arises naturally with mindfulness; understanding the ubiquity of suffering and the deep connection shared with other living beings inclines us to feel others' pain and wish them well, just as we wish to be well. (Hollis-Walker and Colosimo, 2011, p. 223)

Compassion-based meditation practices have routinely been placed in their own category of meditation, separate from our conception of mindfulness meditation. In Siegel's framework for mindfulness based mediation, loving-kindness meditation is shrewdly categorized as a type of mindfulness based meditation, which is one of the reasons for my inclusion of the framework in this paper. What has been made clear to me through an engagement with Buddhist texts and criticisms about the Western appropriation of mindfulness as a concept though, is that mindfulness and compassion actually form the foundation of *all* Buddhist practice. Although the names *mindfulness meditation* and *compassion-based meditation*, or *loving-kindness meditation*, provide helpful distinctions for distinguishing different forms of meditation, it is essential to realize that both mindfulness and compassion epitomize all Buddhist meditation practice to understand the essence of these practices. By engaging in a dialogue about different forms and frameworks for meditation, I do not hope to necessarily distinguish forms, but rather, to expose the nuances and subtle differences in forms to reveal the overlapping concepts and experiences to ultimately enhance our understanding of the essence of mindfulness practice and what it can mean for a human life.

Non-Judgmentalness

One of the main requisites of a deeply compassionate nature is non-judgmentalness (Thera, 1998). Mindfulness is regularly defined as "non-judgmental awareness of the present moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The term 'nonjudgmental' seems to imply an uninhibited acceptance of anything that happens in the present moment. Yet, does a neutral form of acceptance such as this seem to negate the form of mental discernment that allows discrimination between conducive and noncondusive forms of cognitive and emotional response, and which has been oriented as a positive outcome of meditation? A Buddhist perspective on the element of nonjudgmentalness provides clarity on its meaning.

> Traditional mindfulness practices were never intended to operate within a vacuum of dispassionate observation in the absence of eudaimonic goals. To the contrary, Buddhism clearly and strongly endorses 'the cultivation of happiness, the genuine inner transformation by deliberately selecting and focusing on positive mental states'" (Lama & Cutler, 1998, pp. 44–45, cited in Garland, 2015).

Some Buddhist scholars have brought up the point that nonjudgmental awareness is not mindfulness practice, but rather, the result of mindfulness practice. To develop the capacity for nonjudgmental awareness, one must not try to remove any judgment from awareness, but instead develop discerning qualities of judgment in a detached manner. That is, one should try to become aware of one's judgments first, to really understand them in a detached manner, and then begin to discern those that are characterized by value from those that are not conducive to a meditative mindset (Chadha, 2016). The way by which we can do this is by consciously becoming aware of our mindstreams, the

streams of intrapsychic events that pass through our consciousness.

Mindstreams

According to the Vajrayana tradition, "our thoughts, words, and deeds create traces on our mindstreams, and our habits of mind shape them" (Tsomo, 2016). This theory is a very interesting one. It was authored by Lama Tsomo, a native Midwestern American and an ordained female Lama of Tibetan Buddhism. Tsomo brings a unique voice to the table. As one of the only few ordained American female Lamas, she is able to impart the wisdom of ancient Buddhist traditions with an understanding of the actual reality of modern American lifestyle, to become herself a personal component of the bridge between American psychology and Buddhist wisdom. Early on in her studies with a Rinpoche of Tibetan Buddhism, Tsomo says, "he clarified a foundational point to me. He told me that what he was teaching me was not a religion, but a set of highly effective, proven methods for improving my mind*"* (Tsomo, 2016, p. 5). What the Rinpoche was teaching Tsomo was a technique and lifestyle based on the formal practice of mindfulness and its application to one's thoughts, words, and actions. Tsomo says these 'create traces on our mindstreams.' This abstract, conceptual interpretation of our mental state is to some extent obscure, yet it seems that the substance of what she is trying to communicate is that our mental state and stream of consciousness are affected by everything we think, say, and do. This notion is argued specifically because each of these experiences—thinking something, saying something, or doing something—is rooted in a mental conception or narrative of such experience, whether conscious or subconscious. We can thus affect our mental state by becoming aware of our mindstreams and affecting them through changes in our thoughts, words, or deeds, which naturally begins to happen

through the adoption of a genuine understanding and practice of mindfulness meditation in formal practice, as well as postmeditation practice.

Chapter Three: Principle Components of Practice
Awareness and Attention

Mindfulness is not only a technique we can practice in meditation to evoke comfort of mind and body; it is also a philosophy and way of being (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Mindfulness can be a conscious way of thinking, speaking, and acting, all of which can be learned in formal meditation practice and practiced in daily life. Mindfulness is applied to thoughts, spoken words, and actions through the ways we respond to our thoughts that characterize these experiences. So, rather than thinking of thoughts as mindful or mindless, we should think of thoughts as they are, and let our reactions to those thoughts open up the possibility for the application of a personal understanding of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Mindfulness related meditation practices offer practical techniques to improve our ability to become more aware, essentially by drawing in our attention to our thoughts, sensations, feelings, and other intrapsychic events that are constantly occurring in our minds consciously and subconsciously. The commonality of effect has been found to be due to the cognitive action of drawing in attention to the present internal phenomenal moment that is being experienced, and that is often not attended to with focused attention due to the distractions of the external environment (Hölzel, 2010). To engage in such a practice thus necessitates some form of awareness, as well as some form of attention to engage and re-engage our awareness (Brown and Ryan, 2003). To become more aware, we must attend. In other words, attention is an essential, foundational element for the development or cultivation of changes in awareness. The mechanisms, subsystems, and qualities of attention and awareness, as well as their overlapping and interrelated nature, will be discussed in this chapter, all in regards to mindfulness meditation. The reasons for

the explicit explication of these concepts is due to the necessary understanding of the principal components of mindfulness meditation for an understanding of the more complex Buddhist expansions of such topics discussed in the previous chapter.

The Central Roles of Awareness and Attention

Awareness is very important. We are here, nowhere else. Since we are here, why not be here? – Chögyam Trungpa (Trungpa, 2008)

Awareness and attention are undeniably fundamental processes for the normative experience of daily life, as well as for formal meditation practice (Brown and Ryan, 2003). Before discussing the reasons behind this statement though, we must first ask ourselves what awareness and attention are and imply. Both attention and awareness are dynamic processes that are central to human consciousness (Brown and Ryan, 2003). Awareness has been defined as "the background 'radar' of consciousness, continually monitoring the inner and outer environment," while "attention is a process of focusing conscious awareness, providing heightened sensitivity to a limited range of experience" (Brown and Ryan, 2003 p. 822; Westen, 1999). These definitions apply to meditation practice, as well as to any experience of attention and awareness. In regards to mindfulness meditation specifically, "mindfulness can be considered an enhanced attention to and awareness of one's current experience or present reality"—the term *enhanced* refers to a more open and or receptive form of awareness and attention (Brown and Ryan, 2003, p. 822).

Awareness is a dynamic process that, when enhanced through mindfulness meditation practice, can enable a more grounded, personal identification with one's intrapsychic experience (Brown and Ryan, 2003). Mindfulness meditation—especially

the open-monitoring form of practice—has been shown to foster nonreactive awareness of experience (Lutz, 2009). This refers to the ability to detach oneself from one's habitual mental reactivity to experiences, and be able to simply attend to a state of awareness without as much of the personal, emotional layering that often clouds a person's objective perception of reality. Essentially, by becoming aware of our individual habitual reactivity to intrapsychic events, we can lessen unconstructive reactivity, which includes physiologically responding to non life-threatening stressful situations as if they are life-threatening, as well as experiencing excessive maladaptive rumination (Heeren and Philippot, 2010). Lessening unconstructive reactivity has demonstrated to improve one's attentional capacity in meditation, as well as positively expand attention-related behavioral responses outside of meditation practice (Jha, 2007). In practical terms, this means drawing in attention to our intrapsychic environment in meditation—noticing when we start thinking about something else, for example—and consciously taking note of how we are mentally reacting to the awareness of our thoughts, and then intentionally drawing our awareness back to the object of meditation (the breath, for example) to train our minds to take a more detached, neutral perspective on our own thoughts.

The Nature of Attention in Mindfulness Meditation Practice

The process of attention underlays the experience of awareness, and thus mediates our conscious experience of awareness. To engage in attentional training thus facilitates changes in awareness. Teachers of mindfulness meditation typically instruct practitioners to draw in their attention to whatever is *here*. In mindfulness meditation, this means we are intentionally attending to our internal environment, meaning whatever arises inside

our mental space. This includes thoughts, feelings, and sensations—any internal stimuli that arise in our awareness during practice (Lutz et al., 2015). Thus, during mindfulness meditation, whatever surfaces in the conscious scope of our internal environment is what we should be attending to, and that which we are encouraged to consciously draw into a field of nonjudgmental, passive awareness of (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). This explanation goes hand in hand with Kabat-Zinn's operational definition of mindfulness itself: "the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Although meditative traditions vary greatly based on their object of focus, practices, and language by which they discuss concepts, it seems that the general array of mindfulness and meditation practices, regardless of epistemology, have a principal component of attention (Valentine, 1999). Usually this component of attention is related to an alteration of attention, enacted with the intention of an extending or expanding awareness. Although extensive meditation research had been conducted by the brink of the twenty-first century, little of such research had been specifically focused on the mechanisms of attention and how they are affected by meditative practice (Valentine, 1999). Now, the number of such studies has skyrocketed. In one of the first few studies that investigated the link between meditation and attention, researchers compared the effects of concentrative and mindfulness meditation on sustained attention. Concentrative meditators were instructed to draw their attention to a specific object of focus (focused attention), while mindfulness meditators were instructed to draw their attention to whatever arose in awareness (distributed attention). Researchers compared these groups

with controls, and looked into the effects of the varied attentional training that participants experienced. It was proposed that both types of meditation would positively impact attentional distribution capacities through an alteration in control processes. Its findings indicated that both groups of meditators showed improvements in sustained attention tasks compared with controls, with long-term meditators consistently showing greater improvements than short-term meditators. The meditators who participated in this preliminary study were recruited from Buddhist-based meditation centers and were placed in the concentrative or mindfulness meditation groups based on their style of regular practice prior to the study, thus producing a highly authentic study whereby the unchanged practice of regular meditators was studied in comparison to a control. These same meditative effects of enhanced attentional capacity have been repeatedly validated by contemporary findings for a heterogeneity of meditative states (Lutz, 2008; Semple, 2010; Jha, 2007).

Attentional Subsystems: Qualities and Mechanisms of Attention

Considering that mindfulness is often defined in terms of attending to the present moment, it is important to define attention and to explore subsystems of attentional processes. According to theories proposed in 2007, attention can be subdivided into three interrelated, but distinct systems: alerting, orienting, and conflict monitoring, which can shed light onto the ways that attentional changes manifest. (Jha, 2007). They define these subsystems as follows: “alerting consists of achieving and maintaining a vigilant or alert state of preparedness, orienting directs and limits attention to a subset of possible inputs, and conflict monitoring prioritizes among competing tasks and responses” (Jha, 2007). Jha elucidates the difference in these attentional subsystems between two main forms of

meditation: concentrative meditation and receptive meditation—the latter of which has no orienting process. In receptive meditation, attention is not being limited to a certain object of meditation, in the way that it is during concentrative meditation. Rather, attention is placed on the whole field of awareness so that the mind is receptive to whatever surfaces. This form of meditation seems to be more difficult for Westerners, as it is easy to get lost in mind chatter if the mind's attentional habits have not been properly trained. Jha's study sheds light onto the fact that prior experience with some form of concentrative meditation might allow a person to achieve a more impactful experience of receptive attention, specifically because the practitioner can develop a better sense of orienting and conflict monitoring through the continual return to the object of meditation. Essentially, practicing mindfulness meditation in which you are focused on something specific can help train the mind to establish a certain field of attention. This notion aligns with the Buddhist philosophy on training attentional capacities in a concentrative form of meditation before moving onto a receptive form of meditation. Once a consistent practice of concentrative meditation is achieved, it is much easier to establish a practice of receptive meditation. Additionally, once a sustained practice of concentrative meditation is established, it is much less difficult to understand the implications of expanding attention to the entire field of one's awareness (Jha, 2007). This notion holds direct implications for the Western adoption of meditation practice, by explaining the ways by which we can adopt an attentional practice that actually leads to attentional changes.

Apperception: Understanding the Interaction between Awareness and Attention

The various attentional effects we see in mindfulness based meditation practice have been linked to the faculty of changing one's internal perception. Meditation can affect perception not only by strengthening attentional processes, but also through altering the perceptual bias that most people develop because of their personal life experience and habitual conventions of stress reactivity (Hodgins and Adair, 2010). This change in internal perception can cause a profound shift in the way we perceive the world, specifically leading to the cultivation of *apperception.*

Apperception can be defined as "introspective self-consciousness," or "mental perception" (*apperception,* Merriam-Webster, 2011), as well as "fully conscious perception" (*apperception,* Oxford, 2017). In regards to mindfulness based meditation practice, this means that awareness and attention affect one's perception, allowing for a deeper form of conscious awareness. If mindfulness is about becoming aware and in tune with the present moment, and meditation is a silent practice of introspection on or mental perception of a certain object, then we could also say that mindfulness meditation is about cultivating a fully conscious form of perception. While it is not uncommon for Westerners to present meditation as a technique with the primary aim of relaxation, to the contrary, mindfulness meditation can be intensely challenging, as it encourages us to ground ourselves and strip down our preconceived perceptions to come into contact with a more full and realistic version of our attentional habits.

Apperception can be viewed simply as an extension of perception, as a more full, self-directed, and introspective form of perception, which can be cultivated or experienced through practices of awareness and attention. This means that mindfulness meditation practice can affect one's perception, of oneself and or the world, creating a

more fully conscious perception of things. Thus, another way of discussing the effects of meditation might be to transform perception into apperception. This transformation is rooted in an extensive process of self-learning, in which we can feel many positive moments of relaxation—as we begin to distance ourselves from our worries and become aware of the control we can exert over our own minds, for example—in addition to the more negative moments we might experience—in which we become aware of our biases, negative judgments, or unpredictable mental state, for example. This transformation of one's habitual mode of perception into apperception is a difficult, dynamic process in which we experience both positive mental states and negative mental states. Through sustained mindfulness practice during these states, we can progressively transform the turbulent waters of our mind into the calm waters of a more settled resting state: a state of apperception.

The concept of apperception is closely related to the Sanskrit term *samjña-skandha (*Coseru, 2009). This term refers to a person's ability to understand and fully comprehend the distinctive essence or quality of the object of one's awareness. *Samjña* in essence means, "to understand," "to be aware of," or "to cause to be understood." These definitions all relate to the aforementioned, secular definitions of apperception, yet I would like to linger on the last phrase of the definition: "to cause to be understood." The Buddhist perspective on the qualities of awareness and apperception seem to place a great focus on the process of understanding, rather than simply the actual subject that is understood. The Buddhist dialogue places these values in a realm of practice. Awareness is not only about being aware, but also about the continual process and cycle of becoming more aware, which is founded on a 'remembering' and which leads to perception

becoming apperception more naturally and organically. When one becomes aware of something internally, mindfulness can then be applied to that awareness, and the teachings one has accrued from prior meditation practice can be applied to that awareness to create a subtly more introspective form of self-consciousness. It is not just awareness that is important, but the practice of always bringing awareness to attention, as well as attending to what we are aware of, which is the present moment of reality. This notion of apperception is thus about cultivating, developing, and always intending to improve one's personal sense of awareness to enhance one's perception of reality. By intending to keep this in mind in the uptake of a mindfulness meditation practice, we might realize that it is not the outcome of enhanced perception that we should focus on, but rather, on the process of training the mind to embrace the entire process of enhancing our directed attention to ultimately lead to transformations in our awareness, and subsequently, our way of being.

Chapter Four: Mindfulness Meditation and the Stress Response

Habitual Stress and the Ways we Typically Engage

> When we consider the mind as an embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information, we come to realize that we can actually use the mind to change the brain. The simple truth is that how we focus out attention, how we intentionally direct the flow of energy and information through our neural circuits can directly alter the brain's activity and its structure. The key is to know the steps toward using our awareness in ways that promote well-being." (Hanson, 2009, p. v)

Mindfulness meditation practices offer a different way to effectively respond to stressful states of mind. Much of the hype that has recently been focused on mindfulness meditation surrounds the idea that such practices can re-wire our brains and diminish our experience of stress. Although the complex structure and relational processes embedded in the human brain do not seem as susceptible to the immediate changes that much of the buzzword-heavy media likes to portray, the brain is indeed receptive to much constructive change offered by mindfulness meditation (Hanson, 2009). It is not enough to simply say that meditation can change our brains or re-wire neural circuits, as any experience does so due to the dynamic, malleable nature of our brains. But, through a consistent, disciplined practice of meditation, it seems that lasting neurophysiological changes can indeed be shaped and felt (Lutz et al., 2016) This notion might be illuminated through the following metaphorical anecdote. Just as individual raindrops seem to not cause much of a significant effect on the rocks they fall upon, yet with an accumulation of many raindrops over time, the magnificence of the Grand Canyon can be

carved into existence; mindfulness meditation may similarly accumulate its beneficial effects on a person's wellbeing over an accumulation of time and practice (Hanson, 2009).

Understanding the Basic Stress Response

Understanding the basic stress response is crucial to understanding the many benefits that mindfulness meditation can offer a person. Stress can be defined as "the non-specific response of the organism to any pressure or demand" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This means stress is the complete experience of a stressor (internal or external) as well as one's response to that stressor (physical and mental). Because of this, the concept of stress encompasses an unbelievably wide array of experiences, especially because the human stress response in fundamentally characterized by non-specificity. Dr. Hans Selye, the doctor who coined the aforementioned definition of stress and popularized the concept beginning in the 1950s, claims that "the most interesting and fundamental aspect of stress was that the organism undergoes a generalized physiological response in its efforts to adapt to the demands and pressures it experiences, whatever they might be" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p.239). He posits that stress is a natural, unavoidable part of life, as it is a physiological mechanism that evolved specifically to endow an organism with the ability to respond to any pathogen, stressor, or pressure that is experienced. With this definition in mind, we might recognize the natural logic inherent in the notion that our experience of stress might be alleviated if we intentionally support or alleviate those demands and pressures to affect the non-specific, generalized cascade of the stress response.

Another way to think about this is by conceptualizing our experience of stress as the result of a relational process between the stressor itself—the reception of bad news, for example—and our mental reaction to that stressor. Stress has been conceptualized as a psychological transaction between a person and his or her environment (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This theory gives ground to the notion that mindfulness meditation is able to affect the stress response, as mindfulness is all about relationality, through the ways we relate to ourselves and the present moment. So, if stress is a transaction, we may be able to affect that transaction through a re-appraisal of our awareness of the event or situation at hand: "by changing the way we see ourselves in relationship to them [stressors], we can actually expand our experience of the relationship, and therefore modify and modulate the extent to which it taxes or exceeds our resources or endangers our well-being" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 294). Stress is natural and inevitable, but by conceiving it as a transaction that we can consciously affect, we can drastically change our experience of stress.

It is very interesting to note that Buddhist philosophy also discusses the inevitability and naturalness of human stress in Theravadan scripture. In the Satipatthá Sutta, it is said, "without contemplative effort, the body and the mind of this Bhikkhu are distressed, coarse" (Thera, 1998, p. 60). Buddhist scriptures contend that people naturally encounter inevitable stresses throughout life, and that people are naturally distressed and coarse. Additionally, this scripture takes the notion of the experience of stress a step further by proposing that the stress we feel is not only psychological distress (stress of the mind), but also emotional distress of the heart. "Hadaya santapabhutam sokam," mentioned a little further along in the Satipattá Sutta, refers to a sorrow that naturally

arises due to distress of the heart, which is supposedly produced by a negligence of the intentional practice of *sati*. According to Buddhist philosophy, the distress of mind and heart all humans feel can be alleviated through a disciplined practice of formal meditation practice and the infusion of mindfulness in postmeditation practice (daily life) (Thera, 1998). Additionally, it is not enough to simply practice; to really feel the holistic benefits of the practice, it is crucial to understand the practice itself, as well as the ways it can affect the body and mind. Incorporating this notion into the development of a secular practice, it seems that understanding the stress response—one of the key outcomes that Westerners hope to affect through the adoption of meditation practice— can serve to help practitioners understand what is happening in their minds and bodies and thus encourage the development of practice through mental challenges they will expect and recognize. It is not uncommon for Westerners to sit down in meditation practice with the expectation to de-stress, yet become even more worked up and discouraged because of the feeling of a failed attempt when they do not become relaxed. By understanding the difficulties of meditation and the ways it actually affects the stress response, we can ground ourselves through the sometimes tedious stages of the early development of practice, and truly delve into the deeper stages of mindfulness meditation.

The Autonomic Nervous System and the Habitual Nature of Our Stress Reaction

> Automatic reactions triggered out of unawareness—especially when the circumstances are not life-threatening but we take them that way all the same—can compound and exacerbate stress, making what might have remained basically simple problems into worse ones over time. (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 307)

Each person's experience of stress is different. Potential stressors can be acute or chronic, internal (thoughts, emotions, sensations, pain) or external (environmental, societal, social, physical, economic, political, etc.) (Koster, 2007). Our mind and body automatically react to any and all of these stressors, usually through the habitual mechanisms we've developed throughout our lifespan, but specifically through a reaction by our autonomic nervous system. The subsystem of the nervous system that we are trying to affect through meditation is the autonomic nervous system, which regulates our internal bodily states. This system is broadly divided into the sympathetic and parasympathetic system. The sympathetic system is our fight-or-flight response, the system that speeds everything up that is necessary for arousal and response to a stressor, and the parasympathetic system is what calms everything down and brings us back to equilibrium after sympathetic activation. The power of the sympathetic system is striking, anecdotally evidenced through stories of extreme hyperarousal, like when a mother lifts up a car to save her child from danger. The sympathetic nervous system has the capacity to provide an enormous surge of energy in life-threatening situations. It also has the capacity then, to provide that energy in situations we *perceive* as very stressful, even if they may not be deserving of as much energy. The purpose of mindfulness meditation then, in this sense, is to change our perception of stressful (but non-life-threatening) situations that we seem to be meeting with an over-arousal of our sympathetic nervous system too often. In the modern, developed world, the majority of individuals are not met with life-threatening situations on a daily basis. Yet the United States is encumbered by an epidemic of stress and an over-activation of the sympathetic nervous system. By training our minds to get used to parasympathetic activation in formal practice of mindfulness meditation, we

might be able to become aware of the unnecessary sympathetic activation we experience regularly. And through a consistent practice in which our mind habituates to the physiological and psychological experiences of parasympathetic activation, we might be able to shift from a sympathetic-dominant system to a parasympathetic-dominant system, in which our natural state of mind is more relaxed than stressed, despite external or internal pressures (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

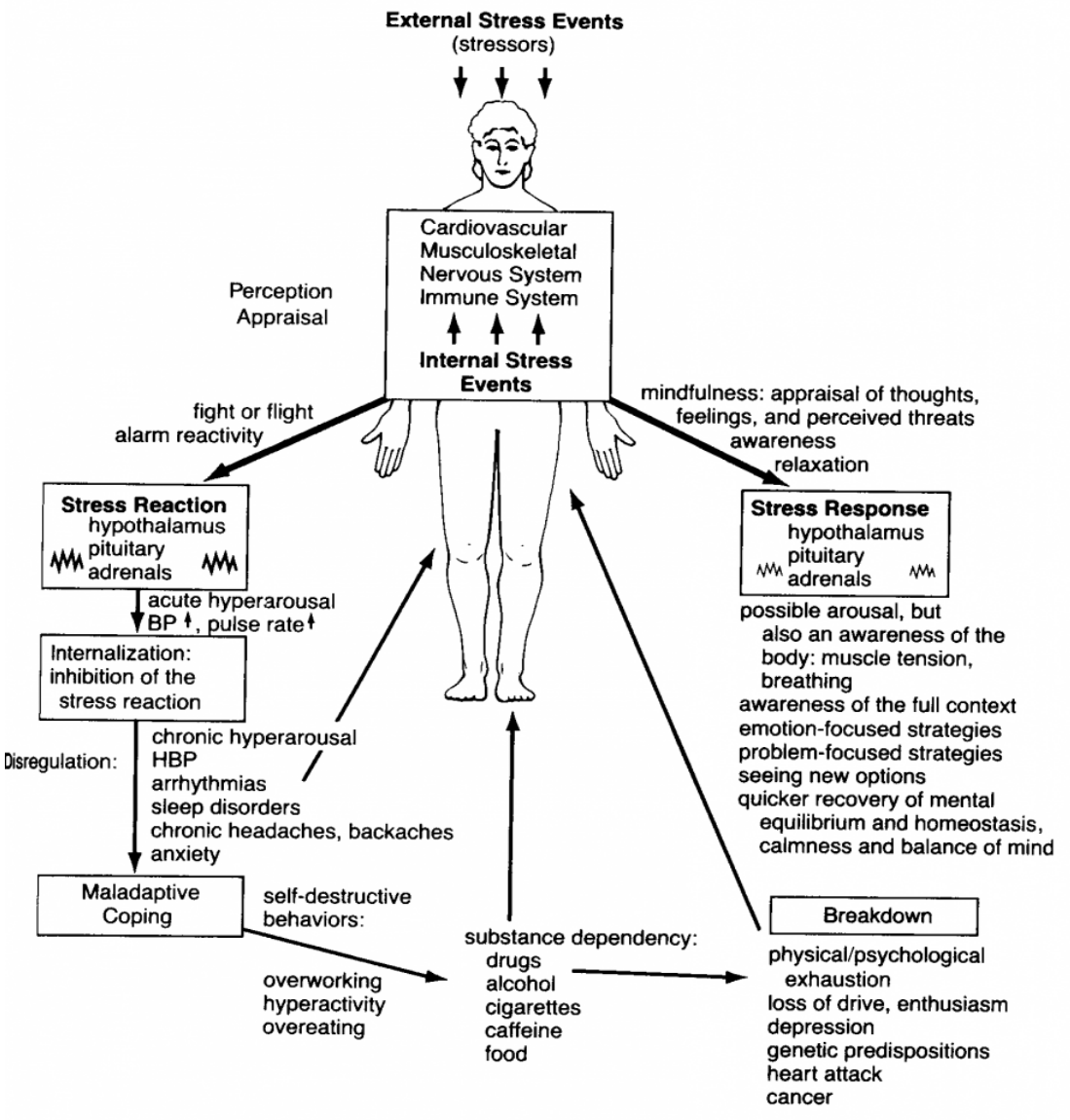

Figure 1: basic cycle of the human stress response (Kabat-Zinn, 2013)

Figure 1 displays a basic cycle of the human stress response, demonstrating how external events and internal stressors affect the entire person, from one's organ systems and habitual stress reaction, to one's internalization of that stress reaction and the various pathways it can lead to. This response (the automatic/habitual stress reaction) is depicted through the left arrow that extends from the figure's body. The arrow that extends from the right side of the figure is differentially called stress *response* rather than stress *reaction,* because it is characterized by a lens of mindfulness. Instead of reacting habitually and automatically to stress, we respond to stress by lining our reaction with mindfulness. As the figure shows, there will be a physiological response either way: the hypothalamus, pituitary gland, and adrenals will all be affected by stress. What changes through an application of mindfulness though, is that a space is opened for the mental re-appraisal of the stressor, which can lead to a more perceptive awareness of what we are experiencing. This deeper, more perceptive awareness can lead to a conscious avoidance of habitual maladaptive coping mechanisms, and quicker recovery from the stressor (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

The Two-fold Nature of our Suffering

Hanson describes our suffering through the metaphorical image of two rounds of darts. The first dart is the first round of suffering we experience: the direct pain and physiological stress that an uncomfortable or painful moment naturally engenders. Then, we experience the second dart, our habitual reaction to the suffering we are experiencing. Once we are experiencing stress or discomfort, it seems that we psychologically assess that experience, which commonly leads to the experience of a second layer of suffering

that is not only often unnecessary, but also frequently much more intensively detrimental than the first dart (Hanson, 2009). To exemplify a daily interaction by which this scenario unfolds, imagine being cut off while driving to work. The other car drives off hastily, and you are left irritated and on edge, despite having been far enough away from the other car for an accident to have been likely. Your stress response immediately begins its cascade of effects, fueled by thoughts about having nearly been in a collision. The alarm reactivity of your sympathetic system immediately goes off, and the hypothalamus, pituitary, adrenals, autonomic nervous system, and immune system all work in conjunction to internalize an approach to overcoming or inhibiting the stressor at hand. Even after the other driver is long gone, you might internalize the seedlings of stress that were planted in your mind, and they might grow into physical tension or manifest in negative thoughts. Applying a lens of mindfulness to this situation would mean becoming aware of the cascade of stressful reactivity and changing its flow of energy. You already experienced the actual stress of the occurrence, so you could acknowledge that mentally and consciously decide to breathe and practice mindfulness. This might mean re-assessing your thoughts and considering the possibilities that might have led to the other driver feeling like he needed to get somewhere so quickly. This means expanding our awareness beyond the small scope of our personal experience and individual perception, to include the perception of others around us as well. By coming into awareness of the automatic ways by which we psychologically respond to stress, we can train ourselves to practice a more prudent and controlled reaction to stress. Through the foundational practice of formal mindfulness meditation, we are trained to ask ourselves throughout our days if we are being mindful. In the aforementioned situation, rather than cursing or

acting in a way that actually amplifies the stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system, we can become aware of our unexamined reactions and re-direct the flow of our mental and emotional energy (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This example of the conscious application of mindfulness to an unavoidable stressor can be extended to countless other situations, including daily encounters that are not crises yet that elicit a strong (and often negative) mental appraisal of the situation, like in challenging personal relationships.

Stress and suffering are an inevitable part of human existence, as we are embodied beings with self-awareness and an evolved stress reaction for protection from harm (Hanson, 2009). We cannot always avoid a collision or situations that irritate us, but we can impact the way our bodies and minds react to and experience unavoidable stressors on a daily basis. What mindfulness meditation may offer practitioners is the opportunity for the conscious re-appraisal of our stresses and our habitual tendencies to over-react to stress, so that we can gain a more sagacious sense of perspective on worries that do not need to cause as much mental and emotional suffering as they often do.

A Mindful Reappraisal of Our Stresses

To understand how mindfulness allows persons to engage in positive reappraisal of intrapsychic events, we must understand how the process of appraisal itself works. Appraisal theory posits that emotions are the result of our reactions and evaluation of a situation (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2002). The mechanism of appraisal is grounded in orienting our attention toward the situation we are appraising. In the case of a stressful life event, for example, we'll experience an initial appraisal based on orienting our attention on the stressor. Then, there will be a triggering of habitual mental reactions to

the focus of our attention, which are typically embedded deeply in the schemas, beliefs, and past experiences of our personal lives (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2002).

So, there is the experience of the stressor, which leads to our automatic appraisal of it (when our attention in placed on the stressor), and then there is a later, conscious interpretation of that stressor. Reappraisal is a mechanism by which we can affect our interpretation of a stressor within the context of our subjective experience (Garland et al., 2015). This notion is, in a way, analogous to Hanson's discussion of the two darts of suffering, which was discussed previously. It is in the experience of the second dart, or the interpretation of the first dart—the actual experience of suffering or stress—that lays the potential for mindfulness meditation to manifest its benefits.

The principle of reappraisal is essentially about shifting one's perspective, and it is postulated to have an effect on how people perceive experiences. Reappraisal has been postulated to be one of the mechanisms by which mindfulness meditation produces its effects. Thus, although the effects of mindfulness meditation are related to the immediate relaxation that some meditators experience, a deepened experience of benefits might actually stem from the challenges their minds are met with, especially when encouraged to be open and patient with a difficult internal environment one is experiencing in the moment. Through sustained practice, the mind begins to adopt more familiarity and proficiency with the experience of shifting perspective with more openness (Shapiro, 2006). This gives rises to enhanced emotional regulation, due to the openness and nonreactivity that begins to characterize one's mind state more and more, as time in formal practice accrues. This in turn affects the way a person perceives stress, as he or she is able to better discriminate moments that are deserving of more emotional energy

from seemingly stressful moments that are characterized by a less serious, fleeting-emotional nature.

Continued practice leads to what researchers have termed, "reappraising, as it involves a fundamental shift in perspective" (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 377). This postulated shift in perspective has also been called decentering and deautomization and is progressively achieved through the formation of psychological distance from one's subjective interpretation of one's experience (Shapiro, 2006; Nakamura and Ho, 2015). This notion underlies the theory that, "as individuals are able to shift their perspective away from the narrow and limiting confines of their own personal points of reference, development occurs" (Shapiro et al., 2006). The cultivation of a deeper capacity for objectivity and nonjudgmentalness is considered adaptive for human development, so a practice that reinforces or strengthens such development is seen as holistically beneficial for the development of improved health and personal wellbeing.

Downstream Emotion Regulatory Processes

Researchers who developed a mindfulness-to-meaning theory propose that mindfulness meditation practice can improve one's eudemonic wellbeing specifically by affecting the neurocognitive and psychological mechanisms of downstream emotional regulation (Garland et al., 2015). This theory is based on an interdisciplinary approach to contemplative practice based on a neurocognitive approach to affective science. The mechanism by which emotion regulation is affected through mindfulness is explicated below:

> Mindfulness is proposed to introduce flexibility in the generation of cognitive appraisals by enhancing interoceptive attention, thereby expanding the scope of

> cognition to facilitate reappraisal of adversity and savoring of positive experience. This process is proposed to culminate in a deepened capacity for meaning-making and greater engagement with life. (Garland et al., 2015)

So, not only can applying a lens of mindfulness to our cognitive appraisals allow us to change our psychological assessment of stress, but also even more so, this can allow us to expand our scope of cognition for an increased capacity to deeply feel the inherent goodness or positivity in moments that are *not* stressful. Although the scope of this paper cannot cover all of the mechanisms that underlie these results, it is important to acknowledge this theory, which seems to align more closely with the essence of Buddhist knowledge, which does not only present the effects of mindfulness as relaxation and stress management, but also as the deepening of human capacity to truly touch and feel the *good* inherent in life.

Mindfulness to Meaning: A Model for the Mechanism of Mindfulness Meditation

The complex nature of these theoretical frameworks begs us to ask, what are we *really* trying to understand? We are evaluating mindfulness meditation first and foremost as a way to improve one's wellbeing. Current psychological frameworks define wellbeing in two general ways, through a hedonic approach and an eudemonic approach (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The hedonic approach posits that wellbeing is achieved through pleasure attainment and pain avoidance, while the eudemonic approach focuses on self-realization and meaning. When I refer to wellbeing throughout this paper, I am specifically referring to this term in the eudemonic sense, as it aligns more closely with Buddhist philosophy (Nakamura and Ho, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The array of benefits that mindfulness

meditation may offer are widespread and highly interrelated, and I argue that all of them are rooted in an experience of an improvement in one's eudemonic wellbeing. Mindfulness meditation is not simply about heightening one's experience of pleasure or lessening one's pain. It can indeed lead to these benefits, and a practice of mindfulness meditation absolutely can be developed for these benefits, or even solely for relaxation and stress management, but a Buddhist understanding helps us realize that those benefits can actually be improved and deepened when they are not the only ones in mind. Mindfulness meditation can actually be very uncomfortable and mentally challenging, as we are training ourselves to sit still and work through thoughts or intrapsychic sensations we might not want to experience. Developing patience and discipline through silence and stillness—especially when we have habituated to constantly seek stimulation—can be exceptionally difficult, yet the overall, long-term benefits of formal practice seem to allow people to tap into deeper-felt benefits of one's overall eudemonic experience of wellbeing. A recently developed framework called the mindfulness-to-meaning model proposes mechanisms in which mindfulness meditation practices may "foster eudemonic responses to stress that engender a sense of meaningfulness in life" (Garland et al., 2015, cited in Nakamura & Ho, 2015). The central position of their theory is as follows:

> By modifying how one attends to the cognitive, affective, and interoceptive sequelae of emotion provocation, mindfulness introduces flexibility into the creation of autobiographical meaning, stimulating the natural human capacity to positively reappraise adverse events and savor the positive aspects of experience. (Garland et al., 2015, p. 295)

The Buddhist Conception of Stress and Suffering

Buddhist scripture presents unawareness as the ultimate root of suffering. This seemingly simple statement actually implies much logical wisdom: if unawareness is the reason for our suffering, we can wake up from suffering by becoming more aware. If we suffer from stress, the first step to overcoming that stress is by becoming aware of the intricacies and subtleties of that experience. To change our stress reactivity—which is fundamental to the experience of any and all of the benefits of mindfulness meditation—we must first become aware of our personal experience of stress and then understand that stress and how we are being affected by it; only then can we truly shift our attentional habits and transform our mental experience.

> In Buddhist psychology, the law or chain of conditioned origination (*paticcasamuppada* in Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures) is a very precise model of how we go through life without being aware or conscious, caught up in an unhealthy spiral in which we experience more and more stress and suffering as a result of not being aware. (Koster, 2007)

In the English language, there is no word or phrase that could properly translate *paticcasamuppada*. Although this complex Pali word has been translated as dependent origination, —essentially that all things are the result of all things prior—what it seems to refer to is this 'spiral' of unawareness far too many Westerners seem to experience. It is very easy to go through life on automatic, without ever tuning into the stress we experience and questioning whether it is necessary or changeable. The concept of

paticcasamuppada helps to demonstrate that this experience is ordinary and natural, yet it can be affected and transformed for an improved wellbeing. The Buddha himself explained to a student of his, *Ananda*, that although this principle seems simple, "the principle of dependent origination is a profound doctrine, difficult to grasp. By not knowing, understanding, and fully realizing this teaching, people live in confusion, just like a long length of rope that is entangled" (Koster, 2007). To untangle this rope, we just need to begin to tune in, become aware of our habitual reactions to stress, and mindfully assess how we can subtly alter those reactions to gradually become more at peace with ourselves.

Chapter Five: Holistic Benefits and Implications

The Benefits of Meditation

According to the Dalai Lama, one of the most well-known and esteemed spiritual leaders of our time, the two principal components of genuine happiness and a fundamental sense of well-being are inner peace and contentment (Fraser, 2013). Our fast-paced, excessively stimulated modern world does little to encourage an exploration of that innerness. It seems to actually hinder that awareness in some ways, as the structure of the Western lifestyle, which is goal-oriented, competitive, and very fast-paced, leaves little time or space for inner reflection. According to Buddhist philosophy, with little inner awareness comes little experience of inner peace (Koster, 2007). That is not to say we cannot be internally peaceful if we do not meditate, but rather, that mediation allows us to become aware of our internal state so that we can actually feel the full experience and benefits of a peaceful inner state. Consistent mindfulness meditation practice opens a quiet, open, and reflective space to explore and develop the inner awareness that is foundational for inner peace.

Looking at research from a bird's eye perspective, the cumulative effects of meditation that have been demonstrated scientifically include, but are not limited to, changes in the structure of neural networks, improvements in emotional regulation, alleviation of stress-reactivity, help with stress-management, enhancement of the immune system response, and an improvement of one's experience of fundamental wellbeing (Koster, 2007). Consistent meditation practice can cause an internal change in the practitioner's mind that allows them to embrace and accept the conditions of their mind and thus the state of their livelihood and life (Fraser, 2013). This practice is not about

changing our life per sé, but rather, about coming to terms with the actual reality of our life and stepping away from the judgments and associations we have developed over our lifetime. This engagement often leads to the cultivation of a sense of mental clarity and wise discernment in our mental interactions, and especially in our experiences of stress. Not only does this allow people to not be as negatively affected by stressful moments, but also, it allows them to relish and more thoroughly enjoy moments of joy and contentedness, simply because of having learned mental techniques to re-assess one's awareness and re-route one's habitual attention (Levitin, 2016).

Modern Mindfulness Mediation in an Era of Constant Stimulation

The rise of virtual interconnectedness has been one of much positive growth globally, but unfortunately it also reaps the consequences of constant stimulation, especially with the rise of more accessible and high-tech phones, computers, and general technology (Levitin, 2016). It seems we are bombarded with new information all the time, from our cell phones and social media, to the news, stressful work environments, and our daily interactions (Levitin, 2016, Chödrön, 2006). These consequences seem to create a sense of societal restlessness, either exasperating or increasing the symptoms of chronic stress, anxiousness, and depressiveness that are affecting more and more people each year (Chödrön, 2006). As the twenty-first century progresses, increasing (and developing) technology, media, and virtual connectedness are drawing people away from interpersonal and personal connectedness. But we can re-gain a sense of that interconnectedness through the realization that we can transform our thoughts, habits, and experiences and thus make a positive lasting impact on our mental clarity, emotional state, and sense of wellbeing in life (Fraser, 2013).

Misconceptions Regarding Meditation and the Cessation of Thoughts

It seems that the promulgation of meditation research and practice in the West has led to the development of stereotypes associated with the practice. I would like to take this time to briefly explore some of those notions, specifically to deter interested Westerners from becoming discouraged by developing practice. One of the most common comments I hear from people when discussing meditation is regarding their inability to meditate because they cannot stop thinking. What I've learned from my exploration of Buddhist scriptures is that meditation is not in essence about the cessation of thoughts. Many people I've spoken with have attempted to meditate, but have given up rather quickly because they are overwhelmed by their mind chatter and feel that they are incapable of stopping their endless thoughts. This often leads to the feelings of disappointment or failure, yet they are mislead, as the cessation of thoughts is not the point or expectation of meditation. What we are really trying to do is actually become aware of our thoughts and get acquainted with our mindstreams, so that we can begin to draw our attention to things we want to attend to more regularly. Meditation is about learning to work through our thoughts, which often gradually leads to the widening of gaps between thoughts.

Each time we get lost in a stream of thoughts that removes our attention from awareness of the present moment, we should look at it as an opportunity to gently and calmly return to the breath or chosen subject of meditation. By thinking, we are not failing. By becoming aware of our wandering thoughts, we are actually succeeding. Essentially then, are we not just training our brains to overcome the habitual ways we react to failure or rejection or discomfort? Are we not simply training our minds to

practice patience? When we become aware that we lost touch with our breath in meditation, we might naturally react negatively, whether that be through a tightening of our physical bodies, or rushing back to where we feel we should be—the breath or other subject of meditation. This might be a very subtle reactionary moment in time, yet it draws a parallel with what we might experience in our everyday lives, when we tighten up when confronted with discomfort, stress, or challenge. So, rather than rushing back to our subject of meditation when we realize we have lost our present-centered awareness, we can train our minds to gradually come back, as opposed to habitually tightening and reacting. By practicing this gentle, non-judgmental return to the object of meditation, we are essentially practicing the ability to consciously shift our attentional mindset by making a modification in what we are attending to, and how we are attending.

Awareness of Attitude Toward Practice

Kabat-Zinn, world-renown meditation teacher and creator of the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program, likes to discuss this topic—the importance of our attention to the attitude with which we practice meditation—through a meditative metaphor about soil.

> It is the soil in which you will be cultivating your ability to calm your mind and to relax your body, to concentrate and to see more clearly. If the attitudinal soil is depleted, that is, if your energy and commitment to practice are low, it will be hard to develop calmness and relaxation with any consistency. If the soil is really polluted, that is, if you are trying to force yourself to feel relaxed and demand of

> yourself that "something happen," nothing will grow at all and you will quickly conclude that meditation doesn't work. (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 17)

Dr. Frédéric Rosenfeld—a well-known French psychiatrist who has been pivotal in pioneering the bridge between Western medicine and Eastern meditation—explains that serious meditators have no expectations, or try their best to drop their expectations and to genuinely become aware of their attitude towards their practice. Letting go of expectations, associations, and judgments about meditation is what leads to a meditator reaping the healing benefits of the practice. Rosenfeld argues that if practitioners go into meditation with a purpose to rid themselves of a certain ailment or habit, they will inhibit their mind's ability to allow the essence of meditation—*letting go*—to flow naturally. (Fraser, 2013, p. 37).

Relational Components of Mindfulness Practice

Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness in terms of *relationality* (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Mindfulness is all about "how we are in relationship to everything, including our own minds and bodies, our thoughts and emotions, our past and what transpired to bring us, still breathing into this moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p xxxvii). This means we not only are being mindful in formal meditation practice and throughout each day, but also in our relationship with our practice. Oftentimes people get frustrated in meditation practice—their backs start hurting, their minds start to wander, questions begin to arise about why they are sitting down in silence when a million things need to be done. Not only is this commonplace, but it is almost expected, and part of the process and practice of

meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). So, we have to be gentle with ourselves. We must be mindful in our adoption of mindfulness practice. We must let the practice of mindfulness manifest in the awareness of the present moment in practice, especially when that moment is a moment of tension and stress, mind chatter and the temptation to neglect practice. This is essentially all about developing a relation with your own practice, and thus deepening awareness of yourself and the typical reactions and mental states your mind automatically inhabit.

The Essence of Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness meditation is ultimately about coming into awareness of the ways in which our minds narrate our perceptions and experiences. It is about using the expanded, more objective mindset we develop in practice to intentionally create distance from our subjective perception of the world and become more compassionate to others and ourselves. To do this, we must learn to be in the present moment as the living, breathing, embodied beings we are, which we can learn by creating a practice of sitting in silence and intentionally transforming our attentional habits. So, in essence, the practice is all about learning to *be,* to thus come into a more fundamental state of being (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

In this paper I proposed that the structural changes that meditation has on our mindsets essentially cause subtle, but significant changes in our perception of the world. Meditation is a way to awaken from the automatic daze we fall into by becoming aware of the way we habitually react to any stressor we experience, whether interpersonal, emotional, or physical (Levitin, 2016). By understanding the stress response and the ways

that we have learned to automatically respond to stress, we can shift our attention (over time) in a way that relieves stress, as well as changes our typical perception of our internal and external reality. Chögyam Trungpa argues that all people can benefit from these practices of meditation, as each person experiences stress and develops habitual states of reaction based on their subjective experiences. To practice mindfulness meditation is to take a step back from these assumed mental states, and to slowly adopt a more objective and realistic view of experiences. Meditators, he explains, do not need to have a practice that is embedded in any spiritual or religious tradition. The practice and benefits of mindfulness meditation are about affecting our habitual awareness, the process by which we experience all events and interactions in everyday life. Trungpa argues that any good craftsman, handyman, artist, businessman—*any* layperson—can benefit from meditation practice. In the simplest sense, mindfulness meditation practice can be viewed as a specific form of attention practice, which can transform and enhance our mental awareness, which serves as the platform by which anything in life in experienced (Trungpa, 2008).

Buddhist Wisdom

In this paper I proposed that the valuable benefits of mindfulness meditation—which have been demonstrated by much research (Fraser, 2013, Hözel, 2012; Jain, 2007)—can be further enhanced and deepened through an interdisciplinary approach to the practice, in which we view a modern, secular approach to mindfulness meditation within a Buddhist conceptual framework. When we explore this enriched context for mindfulness, in conjunction with the study of our habitual attentional patterns and the basic stress

response, we come into a deeper understanding of the ways in which we normally engage with the world, as well as the ways in which we can improve our engagement with each present moment. Through this cross-cultural exploration, the ancient wisdom of Buddhist practices collide with the extensive scientific knowledge of Western psychology, resulting in a simple, yet very profound technique and body of knowledge that can benefit any layperson who longs for a deeper connection and contentedness with their ever-changing life experience.

> Once you have been practicing for a period of time, it is almost inconceivable that you ever could have managed without it in your life—it is that powerful, and that subtle, because at the same time it doesn't seem like any kind of "big deal." Mindfulness is both nothing special and incredible special, totally ordinary and completely extraordinary, all at the same time. (Kabat-Zinn, 2013)

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BIOGRAPHY

Megan Wechter was born on December 2nd, 1994 in El Paso, Texas. She attended college at the University of Texas at Austin, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Plan II Honors and a Bachelor of Science in Psychology. During her time in college, she was a member of Texas Orange Jackets and a mentor for the Plan II-KIPP mentorship program, and she spent her spring semester of her junior year studying abroad at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. During her final year in Austin, she developed and taught a non-profit program called Healing Space, a mindfulness meditation and yoga support group for girls and mothers affected by craniofacial birth defects. During other free time, she taught yoga and meditation to individual families, and did bi-weekly tutoring and meditation sessions with a trauma patient suffering from a neurological syndrome. She was hired by the El Paso Independent School District to draw up a proposal for the implementation of meditation and yoga into the curriculum of twenty-five public schools there. After working in El Paso for some time, she will be traveling for six months and working remotely. She will be traveling in Vietnam and Thailand, furthering her meditation instructor training in India, and spending three months hiking the Israel National Trail. Upon her return to El Paso, she will be working with the school district for a period of time; after which she plans to move to Woodacre, California until she applies to graduate school.